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Principe'—and True Love

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A Stirring Tale of Romance and Adventure in the Great Southwest.

PRINCIEP' ALLOREZ was an anomaly, a thorn in the flesh to men, a fascination to women. Slim, smiling, of irreproachable manners, he needed little speech, for his eyes and his personality spoke at all times. He was elegant in his person, immaculate.

When he came into the sun-baked town on the railroad where the 'dobe structures housed their motley and the sand and cactus stretched in all directions, south into infinitude, north to the hard bit hills, he was clad in white raiment and he rode a horse to make onlookers gape with interest. This was El Toro, who lived up to his name. Almost too big to be ridden but saved by his perfection of proportion and his slimness, El Toro resembled his namesake in the blind charge of his running, the ramping fire of his nature, the courage of his heart. He was black as a moonless night without a star. A huge cloud of mane flowed on his arching neck, the long banner of his waving tail was a pure vanity.

And Principe' Allores loved him very frankly. More than one fracas had come about through some criticism of the horse, sometimes with victory for the master, sometimes with the reverse, for Principe' loved a scrap also. And he was a good fighter.

This fighting ability was one cause for frowns among the male faction of the tiny squalid town that sweated near the Border, for Principe' could do it all ways. Fists, principally, for fists, he would say with his flashing smile, were the Good God's own gift to the male, the right and proper weapon. But he could shoot amazing well, although he had never killed his man.

"Now, why, Principe'," said a cowpuncher interestedly after twenty exciting minutes once in the Three Star Saloon, "why didn't you bore that feller proper, instead of hittin' him in th' shoulder? You had good cause, an' soon's he's able he'll come a-gunnin' for you an' no mistake."

"Why—you see, Bob," Principe' had answered gravely, "I don' like to see a man die. The wiggles—they give one the creeps."

"Great snakes!" said the cowboy wonderingly. "As good a shot as you! Ain't afraid, are you?"

"No," said Principe', "I think not. No."

"But what'll you do when this Tucson-chap comes boilin' after you?"

For a moment Principe' had considered. Then he had laughed at his friend—from up in the north country, whom he saw perhaps twice a year.

"Why, you see," he said again, "there remains the other shoulder."

"Good Lord!" groaned the other. "I begin to see why you stir up talk everywhere you go. Some think you're a coward, an' others—a few—think you're a genius. I'm inclined to favor the latter."

"You're my good frien', Bob," he said, and the matter was closed.

Then there was the time when the tourist with the Van Dyke beard has kissed Miss Emma, the pretty waitress at the Harvey Eating House, who had the distinction of being as good as she was pretty. Her kindly face had flushed painfully at the swift indignity and tears had come in her eyes, but she had taken the man's order without a word. Now Principe' did not know Miss Emma more than very slightly, but he was drinking a glass of milk at the shining counter and saw the incident. He quietly slid off his stool, walked round, and struck the stranger with the back of his olive colored hand on the bearded lips.

"Stan'!" he said, "an' fight! This is Arizona, not New York."

With an oath the man was up, his chair knocked over.

"Why, you ——— Mexican!" he said, strangling. "I'll kill you for that!" and snatched for the traveling cases at his feet.

To the amazement of all he drew forth two long blades, good foils, though without the ordinary protecting knobs at the points that usually hide them in this country.

Trembling with fury, he thrust one at Principe'.

"Fight!" he gritted. "All right!"

Now Arizona has seen and still sees many quick and startling things, but the sudden transforming of a modern railway eating house into an ancient field of honor was distinctly new, and spectators were not lacking. There were several who knew Principe', and they held their breath for his undoing at last. But Principe' laughed a little and bowed, holding out his hand a trifle too eagerly.

And he did fight—like a gentleman of France, though none but his adversary knew it—with thrust and parry and graceful lunge, his slim legs well apart, his feet in their spurred boots set properly, his left hand high above his crooked elbow.

It was the prettiest play the sun-baked town would ever see, and Principe' was too happy for words as he got all there was in it, forced it to desperate earnest, scared the other ash-white, disarmed him at last, drew the point of his blade cross his bearded cheek, very lightly, as a reminder, broke both weapons across his knee—though there was a seeming regret in his manner at the destruction of the good steel—and saw the tourist aboard the departing train—a much chastened fencing master bound for Los Angeles.

Principe' was delighted and laughed a little more when Miss Emma looked at him with her limpid eyes in gratitude, and he went out to El Toro with a joyous step.

Word of this got about, of course, and masculine eyes studied him more alertly. The women who knew Principe' thought about him a good deal.

But Principe', though he played at the game of love a good deal, rode about on El Toro, and came and went to and from his distant *rancho* undisturbed by his notoriety.

At the little sun-baked town a good many tourists got off the daily trains and walked across the hot sand to the square faced hotel that flanked the plaza on the north, for the air of the region was sweet as angels' breath and keen as the swords that Principe' had broken on his knee.

It was wonderful air for lungs that ached for breath in other places, full of the benedcent healing of Nature. Many of these tourists stayed and sat on the long porch of the hotel in the marvelous twilights, looking south to the nether rim of the world where the sand and cacti made a never-to-be-forgotten picture. They were recompense for the blistering days inside the 'dobe walls, those twilights with their purple and gold, their rose and amethyst colors that fell upon the desert with magic.

Among this lonely brotherhood of exiles there sat on the hotel porch one summer dusk as sad and lonely a specimen of the clan as one might come upon in a long journey, though withal a lovely one. Feminine in every line and fair in all ways from her pale cheeks and heavy golden-brown hair to the spirit that shone from her soft blue eyes, she seemed more than ordinarily pathetic as she sat alone by one of the rude pillars that upheld the upper gallery.

In these remote places where the unfortunate go there exists a kindly friendliness, a bon camaraderie, as it were, that makes introduction unnecessary and cheery conversation possible at once. But somehow no one spoke to the brown haired girl, for there was about her an aloofness that forbade intrusion. She had been five days at the hotel—five long, hushed, sun-hot days—and no one had addressed her save the proprietor and his wife. She kept her room during the day and came out with the rest in the cool of the evenings, but her eyes were such deep, clear pools of tragic loneliness that more than one glanced at her with pity. Her name on the register was Miss Lilith Hope, and she hailed from Cincinnati, O.

But Lilith Hope, in her loneliness and her seeming of sadness, was to be a complete and unconscious conquerer—for on that fifth evening when she stared unseeingly at the dead monotony of everlasting sand, unawake as yet to its mystery and its charm, with her little chin in her hand and her soft lips half curved to weeping which her strong heart would not permit—who should ride in along the sorry street but Principe' Allores on El Toro!

Principe' the happy, the carefree—Principe', who glanced at the groups on the hotel porch with a lively interest—and let El Toro curvet proudly—and whose eyes fell lastly on the small and lovely figure by the east pillar.

Lilith Hope raised her blue eyes, half aswim with the troublesome tears, and met the dark, wide, astonished ones of the young man in the picturesque rider's habiliments—and the unconscious victory was accomplished. For Principe', who had played at love so long and so lightly, withal so tenderly and uprightly as one may play that game, looked once and was done for.

He saw the pathos in the controlled face, the stubborn tears that would gather, and his own expressive orbs said to her as plainly as that speech of which he had so little need, "O, stranger heart, I sorrow because you are sad," or something very much to that effect. And at that plain and simple message from a total stranger who looked like a Frenchman, a Spaniard, and an American all rolled into one, the tears welled up and ran frankly down her cheeks. The girl was ashamed and quickly turned her head—and the man rode on. But his sane head was turning like a pinwheel about the centrifugal point of that sweet face.

Twenty-four hours later he was saying to the proprietor of the square-faced hotel, "The room I always take, Dick—an' for a week this time."

So it came about that one more lounger watched the twilights from the porch, a youth in fine raiment, whose extraordinary masculine charm came uppermost with a vengeance. But Principe', who had ever been the very knight of gallantry, became tongue-tied, abashed. When his longing eyes met those clear blue ones he felt like snow melting in the sun. He smoked many cigarets and wished miserably that he knew the sorrow that made this girl so alone. And then he took himself severely to task.

"When were you ever slow to help, Principe'?" he asked himself, and the answer hung fire. But his native bravery came to his rescue and he walked over one night when a great round moon was rising and Lilith's brown head lay idly against the favorite pillar, intending to offer the most commonplace of commonplaces in simple courtesy as an ice breaker. But at his step beside her the girl raised those deep blue eyes to his and the commonplaces fled.

"O, Señorita—Ma'amselle," he stammered, "I cannot stan' the so lonely sadness of your face! I *must* come to you."

And he dropped down beside her on the rough planks of the porch floor.

Now Lilith Hope had been raised in a most conventional environment, in which the unsolicited advance of a strange man was held in great disfavor, and she opened her lips to dismiss him, but made the mistake of looking straight into his eyes again.

Principe's eyes, as has been said before, were articulate and they told her openly that he was dust beneath her feet, that his heart was slowing with fear of her displeasure.

"Yes?" she said, gently, and marveled at herself, "I—am glad."

Principe's heart rushed on again, but he put a strong control thereon. He had won so far. He would be an artist now.

"The little ol' town, she is lonesome when one is new," he said, "an' these everlasting levels—they make you a little—just a little sick inside. Is it not so?"

"Yes—oh, yes!" said Lilith, with the first giving away to the ache, "it is so, indeed!"

"But look you," went on Principe', "you have only the hard start now, the beginning to know this my country. When you *do* know it, when you can see with the open eye, why there is much of sweetness. It is a hard, stern lan,' but it has—compensations. The levels now—they change when one knows them. There are illimitable distances, and sudden slashes in the plain where a man and horse might ride all day invisible from ten feet back from the top—and water holes that one would never suspect—and the great hills there," he waved a slim hand northward, "they are full of mystery, though they seem so barren from here. An' there are horses, Miss Hope, good horses in this desert."

She flushed in the darkness at the tentative use of her name, but made no comment. The friendly voice was very comforting—and she could see those speaking eyes though the last of the light was gone.

"Do you love horses?"

"Do I?" she cried, with the first rush of interest and response, "all my life I have coveted a horse! Always longed to own one."

"An' you never have?" cried Principe' in astonishment, "I'll say! Never had a horse?"

It was as if she had told him she could not read and write.

She shook her head. It was not against the pillar now, but rose up on its own white pillar of throat like a flower refreshed by rain. Already the youth had accomplished much.

"Then," he said with solemn conviction, "you shall ride at once." But he felt the reserve in her that asserted itself intangibly and hastened to qualify.

"I beg a thousand pardons. You are strange—I should be made known to you. On the morrow I shall bring Dick Holloway an' his wife, Anna, to tell you that I am Principe' Allores of Hermosa Rancho—an' the president of the bank—and the ticket agent—an' Miss Emma at the eating house—an'——"

But a laugh stopped him, a tremulous little laugh that was low and musical, not much for real mirth, but consequential since it was the first since the girl had arrived.

"That you are all of these?" she asked, amusedly.

Then Principe' saw how he had mixed his English in his earnestness, and he laughed, too.

"No, no! But these shall vouch for me, shall present me in regular fashion——"

"It is not needed, Mr. Allorez," she said. "I think the introduction is complete and honest. I accept it."

"O, Señorita!" cried Principe', and his delight almost got the better of his caution, for his voice rang gladly, "an' you will ride with me? Soon? I'll bring in The Swallow. She is blue roan with a silver mane an' tail and eyes like stars in a twilight sky. She can run like the win' and is soft on the bit an' gentle as a kitten. She is so pleasant on her pretty feet that a child, the littlest one, can ride her."

There was a very soft note in Principe's voice when he spoke of a little child. The babies now, the babies and horses—they were the veritable last gifts of God when he had given all the rest, the sweet, fine, gratuity.

"You will go with me out across the desert an' let me show you the sweetness that lies beneath the grimness out yonder?" he pleaded. But Lilith had already broken her habitual rule in this pick-me-up conversation and she could not go further.

"No," she said, "I think not. One cannot do such things where I came from."

"Not ride with a frien'?" cried Principe', his castle shattered, "why, it is so little, an' so friendly—so pleasant, too."

Lilith rose.

"You are a very friendly person," she said, a trifle dubiously, "and kindly, too—but—no, I think not. Good night, Mr. Allorez. I feel better for this little visit," she added honestly, as she went indoors.

Principe's eyes were like "stars in a twilight sky," too, when he swung off the porch to walk swiftly toward the livery stable at the other end of the sandy street.

"Billy," he admonished the sleepy night man whom he stirred from his blankets, "get me out El Toro—an' reserve me another stall for nex' week. Have it deep with bed an' exceedingly clean when I come back from Hermosa Rancho, for it is for The Swallow."

For the next two days Lilith Hope saw no more of her new acquaintance, which was just as well, for she was slightly regretting her eagerness to accept a stranger's company. However, the lone levels did not seem quite so hopeless, for she fell to wondering about the water holes that it did not seem possible could be anywhere in the arid stretches, and the deep arroyos.

She wondered, too, what had become of Principe' Allorez—odd name, she thought. Sounded Spanish. Sounded French.

She recalled the handsome dark eyes with the boyish eagerness, the undisputed sympathy. And she could not help but think of The Swallow he had pictured—a blue-roan—with a silver mane and tail! Soft on the bit—pleasant on her feet. What a tongue the youth had! She could see that little mare—like a fairy horse.

And then, at sundown of the second day, she did see her—in the flesh, though far away, for Principe' passed along the half-street, half-road beyond the railroad track on the great black El Toro and he led the most graceful thing she had ever beheld done up in horse flesh. The girl's hands trembled a bit and she got up and went indoors, just to sidestep temptation, for she knew full well that Principe' would arrive hard on the hour at the hotel.

Which thing he did—and was hugely disappointed to find a fat drummer leaning against the enchanted pillar in the twilight and talking monotonously. But Lilith could not stay in indefinitely and Principe' caught her the following evening.

"Tomorrow?" he said eagerly, his eyes on hers like dog's eyes, soft, adoring, unquestioning. "In the very early morning, Miss Hope?"

She stood confused, but Dick Holloway, passing, stopped and joined them.

"Principe', you young imp," he said, "what are you up to now?"

"Persuade her, Dick," cried Principe', "to ride The Swallow. Early tomorrow while it is cool."

The landlord, a kindly man and earnest, smiled.

"The Swallow," Miss Hope," he said, "is perfection. There could be nothing better for you than a ride in the early day."

Good-by to scruples, to lifelong conventions!

This was a new world—and she had always coveted a horse.

"Well—" she said, and Principe', catching the psychological slide in her voice, promised on the spot.

"Sun-up—an' Anna will lend you a riding skirt, sure."

That promised sun-up found her on the steps with eyes of wonder fixed on The Swallow, who stood on the beaten sand. The Swallow, blue-roan and silver, whose beauty beggared description!

With trembling Lilith Hope got in the saddle and took up the reins and the world turned over. . . . Who can describe a ride at dawn in the desert countries?—when the cool blue shadows are giving way to pale floods of rose, when the little dawn wind comes sweet in one's face, when the cacti stand like patient ghosts and the smell of the night-sweet sand is in the air?

She breathed deep and the tired lungs in her breast expanded gloriously. She raised her glowing eyes to the far levels ahead and they were no longer monotonous, but filled with mystery.

The old fears and inward weariness rushed backward and away with the roll of The Swallow's rocking gait.

She had forgotten the youth beside her when he spoke.

"See," he said, "already you are awakening to this country."

True. It was the same, yet not the same at all. And she was drunken with the rock and sway of The Swallow beneath her.

That was the beginning.

Day after day Principe' brought the horses and day after day the girl mounted and rode away into fairyland.

Of course the loungers talked about the new and quick acquaintance, and of course she knew it and was troubled—but the wonderful country—it was no longer anything but wonderful—tempted her and she fled to it like a hart to water.

And Principe' Allorez?

Ah! Principe'!

The world had turned over for him, too!

His ready tongue became halting at times. He could not find the graceful speech he was past master of. And a strange thing had happened. As this fair girl with the soft brown hair passed slowly out of her seeming of sadness, the gay youth who was always happy passed into it. Verily a sadness fell upon the gay and gallant heart, a bitter sweet melancholy came down upon him, while through it all there ran a trembling thread of purest gold, of unutterable happiness. Full well did Principe' know what had befallen him, and he shook and trembled in his high heeled boots.

What had he, Principe' Allorez, rancher in the desert country, in kind with this wonderful creature from so far east as Cincinnati, Ohio? These rides now—some day they must cease and be but memories—and Principe' groaned. The girl turned wondering eyes upon him, but he hastened to smile.

"The world, Ma'amselle," he said, "is it not sweet? Jus' to be alive! It is a so great privilege!"

They were resting by a water hole far on the greasewood plain, and Lilith sat swung sidewise in her saddle, smiling dreamily.

She had fallen into horsemanship with the natural ability and aptitude that marks the young eagle launching into space.

The keen air was sweet to her lungs, the desert had miraculously lost its appalling loneliness.

Verily these few weeks in this new land had shown her much.

"Yes," she said, gravely, "it is a wondrous world. And somehow you seem to see its beauties with a keener eye than any one I ever knew. What are you, Mr. Allorez—Spanish? French?"

"Both," answered Principe,' "my father was half Spanish with an English mother. My dear mother was a French Creole from New Orleans."

And as he spoke his eloquent eyes proclaimed that he had inherited the best of all of those strains, their tenderness, their kindliness, their keenness, as the girl had said.

The long days passed. The week went by and Principe' was in despair that he must go back to the distant ranch for a time, but he left The Swallow with such eloquent prayers that she ride each day until his return that Lilith consented.

So she rode alone and was happier than she had been for many a dreary moon. Old fears and haunting troubles whose presence was advertised in her face began to retire to the background.

"Perhaps," she said to herself one day with none save The Swallow to hear, "perhaps this is sanctuary. Who knows? It is a far cry and I covered my trail, as Principe' would say."

Already she had begun to think of the youth by that charming first name. And Principe'—Ah, Principe' was the best of lovers!

Four days after his departure a rider came in from the Hermosa Rancho, a dusty cowboy, picturesque in leather chaps, and brought a package for "Miss Hope, of Cincinnati, O."

It was a mysterious package, wrapped and tied with cunning art, and it contained things she had never heard of—dried strips of something that looked like dead shrub roots and which were labeled "jerky—to be eaten, Ma'amselle, as one nibbles crackers, when one rides far," and a tiny jar of the purest honey in the world, and some strange, clear candy, "made by El Señora Felicita," while in a wee box there was a small bouquet of slightly faded posies, the pungently sweet, cream-olive bells of the yucca plant.

Though Principe's living presence was absent his thought was not, and for some unknown reason Miss Hope, of Cincinnati, O., laid her brown head down on her arm and wept.

Strange acceptance of a quaint and pretty gift.

But she bathed her eyes and sent back by the cowboy a little conventional note—which Principe' promptly bestowed in the breast pocket of his white silk shirt and carried about with him.

Also Miss Hope carried the jerky and "nibbled" it when she rode. It was salty and had a most delicious flavor which grew upon the palate strangely. She husbanded the little hoard.

The Swallow was perfection, as the landlord had said, and the girl reveled in her temporary possession as one satisfies his soul on long-desired sweets. The past began to seem very far away and she set herself to the serious business of repairing the damage done her lungs by a year-gone illness. Also she fell to wishing for Principe's return—she, who had sealed the book of romance, never to be opened!

And when he did return, eager and immaculate, riding in on El Toro, he sensed the light that grew in her deep blue eyes and his heart stood still with rapture.

So began the rides at dawn and dusk once more, and the air and the freedom from convention—which long-obeyed canons she had broken like cobwebs in the spell of this new country—began to tell on her. Her cheeks, pale as ashes when she sat that first night on the hotel porch, took on a faint tinge of pink, like early roses in the spring, and the tremulous sadness was slipping from her like a garment. Also the lurking fear was not so apparent in her eyes.

"Oh, Señorita," said Principe' one day, looking at her with worshiping gaze, "you are awake at last! I have awoke you to this, my land!"

"Indeed you have," she said honestly, "and to a lot more besides."

"Yes?" breathed Principe', hoping for he knew not what enchanted revelation.

"Yes—to the joy of life, be it what it may, to the—the privilege of living. You make one to—to fight—against his fears—to be strong." She was looking away across the levels from The Swallow's saddle and

"You—do not want him. Ma'amselle? Then you need not have him—ever any more. You shall love me instead."

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